

**RULES COMMITTEE:  
ITEM:**



# Memorandum

**TO: RULES AND  
OPEN GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE**

**FROM:** Mayor Chuck Reed  
Councilmember Kansen Chu  
Councilmember Nora Campos

**SUBJECT: Non-Recyclable Plastic Bags**

**DATE:** January 7, 2008

Approved

*Chuck Reed* *Nora Campos* *1/7/08*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date PF. *Chuck Reed*

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Direct staff to add to the initiatives being evaluated under the Green Vision "Zero Waste" goal, a proposal to prohibit non-recyclable and non-compostable plastic checkout bags in Grocery and Retail Stores in San José. The work plan assessment should examine the feasibility of a prohibition of any major Grocery or Retail store to purchase and use non-recyclable and non compostable plastic checkout bags. Furthermore, staff should ascertain whether temporary exceptions may need to exist for lower grossing stores. The assessment should detail the cost savings of halting the use of such bags and implement steps to address long term goals.

## **OUTCOME**

Halting the use of non-recyclable and non-compostable plastic bags in grocery and retail stores in San José. This initiative should examine the feasibility of such a prohibition and to ascertain whether limited exceptions may be needed for smaller businesses. The assessment should detail the cost impact to the City of halting the use of such products.

## **BACKGROUND**

Council approved signing the Urban Environmental Accords in November 2005. Included in these Accords there are three Actions related to waste reduction. To accomplish Action 4, the City must establish a policy to achieve zero waste going to landfills and incinerators by 2040; Action 5 requires adoption of a Citywide law that reduces the use of a disposable, toxic, or non-renewable product category by at least 50% in seven years. The Mayor's Green Vision goes beyond the Accords to direct San Jose on an environmentally sustainable course and to divert 100% of our waste from landfills and to recover energy from non-recyclable wastes.

On October 30, 2007, Council adopted the goals set out in the Green Vision, including the goal to divert 100% of our waste from landfills, and took the first step toward accomplishing Action 4

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by approving Zero Waste Goals to increase waste diversion to 75% by 2013 and to achieve Zero Waste by 2022. Council also adopted a goal for San José to achieve Global Sustainable City status by implementing at least 19 of the 21 Actions that make up the Urban Environmental Accords, including all three waste reduction Actions.

Other cities and countries have already placed bans, taxes or other restrictions on plastic carryout bags including San Francisco, Oakland, Paris, London, parts of Australia, Bangladesh, the Republic of Ireland, South Africa, Thailand, Taiwan, and Zanzibar. San Francisco grocers were required to use only compostable plastic or recyclable paper bags beginning November 20, 2007. Similar ordinances were passed by the City of Oakland and the Town of Fairfax.

### ANALYSIS

Non-recyclable plastic bags effect the environment and our health. While paper bags are made from a renewable resource, plastic bags are a petroleum byproduct which is a limited and ever decreasing resource. It is estimated that 3 million barrels of oil are required to produce the 27.5 billion plastic bags used annually in California. Plastic bags also effect the environment as litter. Even when plastic bags are thrown away, many don't make it to the landfill; many are thrown to the winds and dispersed due to their light weight and poor handling in transit.

Such wind blown or discarded plastic bags interfere with our parks and streets as litter. Such bags travel from the streets into storm drains, which are a City infrastructure, make their way to the Bay and eventually drift across the ocean.

These plastic bags interfere with natural wildlife, our natural habitat and our waterways. According to marine biologists there exists a heap of debris, made up of plastics and plastic waste, floating in the Pacific Ocean that is twice the size of Texas. This mass of plastic waste is commonly referred to as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

Plastic bags take anywhere between 20 and 1000 years to break down in to small plastic particles that are not biodegradable or ingestible by any living creature. A 2001 paper by Japanese researchers reported that plastic debris soak up a higher concentration of toxins and compounds such as PCBS and DDE, a breakdown product of the insecticide DDT, than the surrounding seawater. These toxin soaked plastics are then in turn ingested by the marine wildlife. Many marine animals, such as turtles, mistakenly eat plastic bags floating in the ocean thinking them jellyfish and choke to death. Many animals such as filter fish and jellyfish will eat floating plastic pellets that have made their way into the water way or the aforementioned plastic particles thinking them fish eggs allowing toxins to work their way through the food web and into our own food supply.

This will have to be a step process. In San Francisco's ordinance, for example, the ban only relates to Major Supermarkets and Chain Pharmacies. The staff's analysis should assess the need for exceptions and steps to lead us to our goal.